Book Review

THE LIBRARY AT THE END OF THE WORLD: NATURAL SCIENCE AND ITS ILLUSTRATORS

Edited by Anita Hansen and Margaret Davies.

Published by The Royal Society of Tasmania
ISBN: 9780992516215 (hardback), 9780992516208 (paperback)
RRP: Hardback $75; Paperback $50

Available from The Royal Society of Tasmania, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Customs House, 19 Davey Street, Hobart, or at www.rst.org.au, or from leading booksellers.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7882/AZ.2014.044

The Royal Society of Tasmania, the oldest scientific society in Australia and New Zealand, was founded in 1843 and quickly established a museum and its own library. By good fortune, the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land at the time was a member of the Royal Society, the Antiquarian Society and the Linnean Society in London. In 1845 he wrote to those (and other) societies seeking books for the Society's library. With gifts from members, by 1849 the collection held 250 volumes. As the Society grew, its acquisitions became more purposeful, emphasizing Tasmanian but also keeping abreast of national and international publications in natural history. In its first century that library constituted the major public source of natural history knowledge in and about this most remote of intellectual outposts. *The Library at the End of the World* reviews some of that library's treasures. For anyone with a feel for the history of Australian science, it is a wonderful reminder of the age of discovery, a time in a new land when almost everything was yet to be discovered. Moreover, the library's growth coincided with the greatest age of developments in biological illustration. The editors and authors have clearly enjoyed selecting pictures from the Library's holdings that are both informative and beautiful.

The Library at the End of the World consists largely of taxon-specific chapters by authorities on: vascular plants; lichens; orchids; crustaceans; insects; fishes; amphibians; reptiles; birds; and mammals. Within the chapters are vignettes by Anita Hansen on the 37 featured artists. None of the chapters pretends to be exhaustive of the taxa, the books or the illustrations; each reflects its author's choices, and that makes for varied but always lively accounts. Birds are the most prolifically illustrated taxa, with great use made of the Society's holdings, especially Gould's *Birds of Australia and the Adjacent Islands* (1848), but also many of the earliest publications, e.g. White's *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales* (1790) and Lewin's *A Natural History of the Birds of New South Wales* (1838) as well as books by several less well known authors and artists.

To quote Peter McQuillan's chapter on Insects: "Remote Van Diemen's Land was to become a fabled destination for early European naturalists. The discovery of its peculiar creatures … reinforced the emerging appreciation of Tasmania's biological novelty." However, this book's interest is not confined to Tasmania, as the library held most of the major works on the biology of the south-east mainland states, for example, McCoy's *Natural History of Victoria* (1885), as well as those of great exploratory voyages, such as La Billardière's *Relation du voyage à la recherche de la Pérouse* (1800), Darwin's *The Zoology of the Voyage of H.M.S.* Beagle (1840), and Richardson's *The Zoology of the Voyage of H.M.S.* Erebus *&* Terror (1844). The interest of the chapters and their illustrations will draw most readers to read about taxa beyond their usual preoccupation. It made me think how we accumulated and shared knowledge in the pre-photographic centuries when biologists depended upon artists to illustrate organisms. Some pictures in this book show why collaboration between good illustrators and biologists can still convey the gist of an organism in ways that few photographs can match.

The attractions of the text and illustrations are enhanced by tight editing and superb design. *The Library at the End of the World* shows how art and science can complement each other; it will delight its reader intellectually and aesthetically. And any profit from the book's modest price feeds straight back into the on-going work of this oldest of Australian scientific societies.

Peter J. Jarman